

On Greek religion

Robert Parker

How did the Greeks understand and demonstrate belief in their gods? And were these gods moral beings? Robert Parker investigates.

Plato against atheists

In his old age, around the middle of the fourth century B.C., the philosopher Plato launched an attack on what he saw (no doubt with exaggeration) as the growing danger of atheism. He harangues the atheists: why cannot they accept the traditions about the gods that they were exposed to from their earliest youth, the stories told them by their nurses, the actions they saw performed, and the prayers they heard uttered by their parents at sacrifices? Plato sees learning to worship the gods as part of the process of growing up, of ordinary socialization as we might say today, of becoming a normal respectable member of society.

So ‘religion’ (as we call it; but the Greeks had no such word – they just spoke of ‘the gods’ or ‘the things of the gods’) is not a special sphere set apart from the rest of life. One doesn’t learn about it from priests or religious teachers, but within the family. There were priests, many of them indeed, but their role was not to teach but to supervise the sanctuaries they were attached to, and to perform sacrifices in them; and even here they had no monopoly, because many sacrifices were performed by magistrates, and private individuals could sacrifice too (like the parents in the Plato passage).

In wishing that the atheists should pay attention to the stories told them by their nurses (what we call the Greek myths), Plato is not being quite candid. What he approves about those stories is that they showed the gods as beings who exist and are powerful. But many of the details of those stories had long given offence to philosophers and moralists. Around 500 B.C. the poet-philosopher Xenophanes had written:

Homer and Hesiod ascribed to the gods everything that among mortals is a shame and a disgrace: stealing, adultery, deceiving one another.

Plato rejected such stories just as firmly as did Xenophanes. But in rejecting a particular story about the gods one was not

rejecting the gods themselves. The myths were told by poets, and everyone knew that ‘poets tell many lies’ (so said a proverb). Where other religious traditions have sacred books, the Greeks just had poets. This may seem a weakness, but it was also a source of flexibility, one of the reasons perhaps why atheism was rare. Plato’s gods, perfectly good beings, are unrecognisably different from the cheerful seducers and squabblers of Homer. But this did not mean that Plato had to reject traditional religious practice along with the old myths. The gods were, one might say, just silhouettes; one could fill in the details according to one’s own taste. What mattered was to honour them, however one thought of them.

The importance of ritual

Performing the traditional rituals was crucial, therefore. In 399 B.C. the philosopher Socrates was prosecuted and condemned on a charge of ‘not believing in the same gods as the city believes in’. The speech he actually made at the trial is lost, but in *Socrates’ Defence* written by his admirer Xenophon (an imaginative recreation of the trial speech) Socrates rejects the charge by arguing

I could have been seen sacrificing at the public festivals and on the public altars by any passerby and by Meletos [the accuser] himself, if he had cared to look.

So a charge of ‘not believing’ can be answered by appeal to how one has behaved. In sociological jargon, what matters is not ‘orthodoxy’, holding the right belief, but ‘orthopraxy’, doing the right thing. Does this mean that one should never speak of belief in relation to Greek religion? Not at all: that would be to subscribe to what has been called the ‘empty heads fallacy’, the idea that when Greeks approached an altar they had no ideas in their heads about the nature or powers or even existence of the being they were worshipping. No doubt they had many such ideas, each individual his or her own; the crucial point is that those

ideas were not policed. The only belief that was to some extent insisted on was that the gods existed and should be worshipped in the traditional ways. And even this was only insisted on ‘to some extent’. Socrates’ supposedly eccentric religious attitudes would almost certainly have gone unprosecuted had he not been associated with some of the individuals responsible for the temporary overthrow of the Athenian democracy in 403 B.C., making his trial at least partly political.

Polis religion

If there were no sacred books and no fixed doctrines, and the role of priests was just to look after the sanctuaries in which they served, how was religious life organized? Where and by whom were decisions (to adopt a new cult for instance) made? They were made in just the same way as decisions about other aspects of public life; in a democracy, this meant by the citizen assembly. At Athens, certain meetings of the assembly had a split agenda by which the meeting was required to deal with three items of ‘sacred’ business before moving on to international and domestic affairs: routine questions about the financing of cults, remuneration of priests, building of shrines, more interesting ones perhaps about allowing a group of foreigner traders to buy land on which to build a shrine for their native god. Any competent politician needed to be able to give the assembly advice on such matters. This is one reason why Greek religion is often now described as ‘polis religion’. This does not mean that all rites were organized by or on behalf of the city, though many were. Individuals were always free to make sacrifices and bring dedications on their own account. What it does mean is that decisions about religious affairs were taken by the organs of the polis, not by a separate body of religious specialists. Priests could make suggestions to the assembly about the particular cults they were responsible for, seers about more general religious matters, but suggest was all they could do. Or the assembly might decide to refer a decision on a religious issue to the gods themselves by consulting an oracle. If so, the advice of the oracular god was always followed. But the decision to consult the oracle was the assembly’s.

Practical religion

The fundamental concern of Greek religion was with this life, the here and now. One's possible fate after death was not a central issue. The Eleusinian Mysteries, it is true, promised initiates a better lot in the afterlife, and many Greeks made the journey to Eleusis to undergo the time-consuming and quite expensive ritual. But few seem to have faced death with confident expectation as to what awaited them; speculations about life after death are almost always accompanied by a cautious 'if', and the traditional Christian vision of this life as merely a preparation for the next would have been incomprehensible to an ordinary Greek. What mattered was the here and now. Victory in war, flourishing crops, fertility and successful childbirth, wealth, safety at sea, rescue from dangers of all kinds, healing, protection of children in the dangerous early years: these were (some of) the goods for which Greeks constantly prayed and made sacrifice to the relevant gods. When they thought they had received them, they would often make a thank-you dedication (perhaps promised in advance, 'if we win, then I will...'). Such a thank-offering might contain a request for a new favour. So for instance a dedication made on the Athenian acropolis runs:

Mistress, Menandros the son of Demetrios (dedicates) this first-offering to you in fulfilment of a vow, repaying a favour to you; protect his [word lost], in gratitude for this.

Or one might ask the god to 'let me dedicate another' – an undertaking to bring the god a further gift, but one that can only be fulfilled if the god keeps one alive and prosperous enough for the new expense. The ideal is to establish a cycle of favour and counter-favour between self and god that will continue indefinitely.

A different good that the gods could bestow was advice. Many of the lead tablets on which individuals who consulted the oracle of Zeus at Dodona wrote their questions have survived, and reveal the very practical problems on which advice was sought. (Frustratingly, we do not know the mechanism by which such questions were answered.)

Did Thopion steal the silver?

Is the child Annylla is pregnant with mine?

Kleoutas asks whether it is profitable and beneficial for him to keep sheep?

Many doctors' surgeries nowadays prescribe 'one problem only per consultation'. If such a rule existed at Dodona, it

was spectacularly neglected in the following:

Epilytos asks by doing what he would be successful and by sacrificing to what god and whether I should practise the trade which I was trained in or turn to another and whether I will get it if he attempts it [note the confusion of 'I' and 'he' here] and whether I should take Phainomena as wife or another woman and whether indeed I should take a wife (now) or wait.

Gods and social morality

Zeus, the god of Dodona, was also the god at whose right hand, according to some poets, sat Dike, justice. I can only touch on a complicated problem here. Moral codes and moral teachings are central to most modern religions and modern assumptions about religion. But the Greeks had no sermons, no Ten Commandments, little fear of post-mortem punishment for wrongdoing, and gods whose own conduct as described in myth would not stand up to moral scrutiny. All the same, the belief that Zeus or 'the gods' uphold the just and punish the wicked is regularly expressed in Greek texts. A context where that belief was intensified was that of oath-taking. Greeks took oaths, invoking divine punishment on themselves in the event of perjury, on many more occasions than do moderns; indeed, an oath was liable to be taken in almost any situation where straight dealing was required (in connection with international treaties, for instance). The belief that oath-breakers, or their descendants, would pay for it was strongly held. In a speech in court, for instance, a lady is reported as having said

I'm willing to bring my children wherever you wish and swear the oath. But I'm not so desperate, or mad for money, as to commit perjury by my children [thus bringing the threat of divine punishment upon them] before I die.

One might say, it is true, that in such a case the gods take vengeance because an oath sworn in their name and broken is an offence to their honour, not because they care for justice. But the practical result is the same: they punish crooked dealing. Thus the gods proved much more effective enforcers of social morality than their own cvs might lead one to think possible. And, despite Plato's anxieties from which I began, most Greeks did continue to practise the religion within which they had been brought up, even if they did not believe quite all the stories their nurses had told them.

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